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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 000248

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2015

TAGS: SENV SY TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY OK'S SYRIA'S REQUEST TO DRAW WATER FROM THE TIGRIS RIVER

¶11. (U) In addition to positive rhetoric and signing of a trade agreement, Turkey and Syria reached symbolic agreements on two heretofore sensitive transboundary water issues during Prime Minister Erdogan's December 22-23 visit to Damascus. Turkey agreed to a Syrian request to draw water from the Tigris river to irrigate 150,000 hectares in northeast Syria, and the two sides agreed in principle to a dam project on the Orontes River, which runs from northwest Syria into Turkey's Hatay province, forming the border for much of its way.

Tigris Water for Syria

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¶12. (U) The Syrian plan calls for the construction of pumps and pipes to transport water from the Tigris valley into the plains of northeast Syria. According to Turkey's MFA, the Syrians plans to pump as much as 100 cubic meters per second during high water flow periods and only 15 cubic meters per second in the summer when the Tigris flow is lowest. This represents a significant draw from the Tigris, which flows on average at about 350 cubic meters per second at the Syrian border. The water will be pumped into a reservoir for storage and used to irrigate 150,000 hectares.

¶13. (C) MFA told us that Turkish officials did not believe Syria needed Turkey's permission to extract water from its side of the Tigris, which forms the Turkish border in the region, just before flowing into Iraq. Erdogan told the Syrians that Turkey had "no objection" to this plan. Somewhat bemused, MFA noted to us that, Syria is not taking water from Turkey but from Iraq. The Syrians told Turkish officials that Iraqi officials had agreed to the proposal two years ago (during the Saddam regime). Turkish officials emphasized that while Turkey has no current objection to the project, the issue should be addressed at some later date by the three states. MFA DDG Mithat Rende added that the Syrian plan is expensive -- both for the equipment required and the energy cost of pumping the water -- and inefficient because of the high degree of evaporation from the reservoir and the inefficiency of Syrian agriculture in the arid northeast of Syria.

Orontes River Dam

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¶14. (C) After giving his nod to the Iraqi request, Erdogan raised the long-contentious issue of the Turkish plan to dam the Orontes river, which runs from northwest Syria into the Hatay province of Turkey. The dam project, designed in 1990, would provide water to irrigate 20,000 hectares in Turkey and 10,000 hectares in Syria, help control seasonal flooding and provide hydropower. Rende said that Syrian officials "agreed in principle" to proceed with the project but needed to look over the details before going forward. Rende claimed that Syria's agreement on the Orontes is a de facto recognition of Turkey's sovereignty over Hatay province, which Syria has long claimed belongs to it as the lost Sanjak of Alexandretta. Rende also pointed out that the Syrians continue to be inconsistent in their transboundary water policy: when it concerns the Euphrates, they insist that they have a right to the water, but in the case of the Orontes, with headwaters in Syria, the Syrians insist that the waters are theirs to control.

¶16. (U) Baghdad Minimize Considered.

EDELMAN